



U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

## Administration for Children & Families

### Marriage Education for Couples Becoming Parents

#### Overview

The transition to parenthood, especially with a first child, creates a fundamental life change for the couple involved. The transition requires couples to adapt their relationship and individual roles, improve their communication skills, and contend with their existing life responsibilities while assuming responsibility for a child. Expectant couples are naturally concerned about the well-being of their child, thus may be especially open to learning new information; adopting new, positive behaviors; and improving their marital relations. Although programs generally focus on married couples, the transition to parenthood is also a moment when unmarried couples can strengthen their relationship and may benefit from education about healthy marriage.

Research indicates that after the birth of a first child, couples disagree more often than before, experience greater conflict, and report lower satisfaction with their own relationship. How couples approach marital conflict is critical for the overall health of their marriage and their children's well-being. Very high levels of parental conflict are associated with greater emotional and behavioral problems in children. While it is common for expectant couples to attend childbirth education classes together, such classes typically focus on preparation for labor, birth, and child development rather than many life changes that will follow. Marriage education for couples becoming parents focuses on expectant couples' attention to relationship issues before they experience marital distress brought on by the transforming event of becoming parents. The following are examples of marriage education programs for couples becoming parents.

#### Programs

***Becoming Parents Program (BPP):*** This approach targets married or committed couples who are becoming parents for the first time through birth, adoption, or foster parenting and consists of a series of classes designed to help them learn skills and knowledge to strengthen their relationships. BPP is based on principles taught in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a comprehensive program for couples contemplating marriage. BPP supplements the PREP curriculum with topics relevant to the unique period surrounding the birth or adoption of a couple's first child. BPP focuses on relationship skills learning, as adapted from PREP; issues associated with managing fatigue, stress, anger, and division of household labor; and lessons in infant care. The program involves 27 hours of classroom time, mostly during the weeks preceding birth, with one 3-hour "booster" session held when the infant is 6 to 8 weeks old and another when the child is 6 months old. Program instructors often are nurses, but paraprofessionals can be trained in the program method.

For additional information, see the website at <http://www.becomingparents.com>. Also, a book by the BPP designers, *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows* by Pamela L. Jordan, Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, is available from Jossey-Bass publishers at <http://www.josseybass.com>.

**Becoming a Family Program:** This program was part of an on-going research effort seeking to understand how the transition to parenthood changes the marital relationship. The program provided a supportive context in which spouses could learn from other couples experiencing the same life transition. It was designed to be a safe place for a small group of couples to share their concerns about family issues and learn from one another during the transitional period with the help of a mental health professional. Group sessions focused on four major areas: couples' relationships, parent-child relationships, relationships with extended families, and the development of supportive networks. Agendas set by group leaders in collaboration with participants often focused on actual, ongoing problems. Couples were encouraged to share their experiences and feelings and to learn from each other. The evaluation found a decline in marital satisfaction in the control (but not program) group 18 months post-partum, though marital satisfaction in the two groups converged by 3 years post-partum. Although the program is no longer operating, it can serve as a model for interventions that aim to provide new parents support groups.

For additional information, see Cowan, Carolyn, and Philip A. Cowan. "Interventions to Ease the Transition to Parenthood: Why They Are Needed and What They Can Do." *Family Relations*, vol. 44, October 1995, pp. 1-11. Also, a book authored by the Becoming a Family Program designers, *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples* by Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, is available from Lawrence Erlbaum Associates at <http://www.erlbaum.com/index.htm>.

**Bringing Baby Home Program:** This program provides an educational component and support groups. It aims to show couples that the stresses they experience as new parents are normal and not necessarily evidence that their marriages are in serious trouble. The hospital-based program, provided by trained nurses or childbirth educators, consists of a two-day workshop and 12 support group sessions held over 6 months. The workshop teaches couples the warning signs of relationship problems, how to express anger constructively, and how to build friendships. The curriculum aims to prepare couples for the stresses of parenthood and to teach them about child development. It also includes marriage issues unique to the transition, including sex after childbirth, and how to manage sleep deprivation. For more information, go to <http://www.kirlinfoundation.org/KFi.htm>.

**Marriage Moments Program:** This program, used in three Utah hospitals, is designed to strengthen the marriages of couples preparing to be new parents by supplementing existing childbirth education classes with short video presentations followed by discussions with a childbirth instructor. Couples are encouraged to complete exercises at home in the Marriage Moments Activity Guidebook. A related curriculum has been designed for use in home-visiting programs with new parents during the first year of a child's life. During home visits, health educators supplement information on infant development and effective parenting with a 5-minute module on marriage skills to strengthen couples' relationships. All participants receive lists of useful resources that they may explore to help strengthen their relationships. For more information, see the website at <http://marriagemoments.byu.edu>.

**Additional Information:** For more information, or to request technical assistance, visit the ACF website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/key.html>. Or contact Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education, at [bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov) or (202) 260-1550

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